

Cambodian Shoe Factory Collapses, Kills 2

Sopheng Cheang, Associated Press

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — The ceiling of a Cambodian factory that makes Asics sneakers collapsed on workers early Thursday, killing two people and injuring seven, in the latest accident spotlighting the often lethal safety conditions faced by those toiling in the global garment industry.

About 50 workers were inside a workroom of the factory south of Phnom Penh when the ceiling caved in, said police officer Khem Pannara. He said heavy iron equipment stored on a mezzanine above them appeared to have caused the collapse.

Two bodies were pulled from the wreckage and seven people were injured, he said. Rescuers picked through rubble for several hours and after clearing the site said that nobody else was trapped inside.

At a clinic where she was being treated for her injuries, worker Kong Thary cried on the telephone as she recounted the collapse.

"We were working normally and suddenly several pieces of brick and iron started falling on us," the 25-year-old said.

The accident comes just a little more than three weeks after a building housing five garment factories in Bangladesh [crashed down on thousands of workers](#) [1], killing 1,127 people. That disaster is the deadliest in the history of the global garment business and has led to calls for Western retailers to do more to ensure the safety of those who make their products.

"This shows that the problem is not only isolated to Bangladesh, and that companies (elsewhere) are trying to drive prices down by taking shortcuts on workers' safety," said Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch.

An initial investigation showed the ceiling that collapsed Thursday was poorly built and lacked the proper building materials to support heavy weight, said Ou Sam Oun, governor of Kampong Speu province, where the factory is located.

Chea Muny, chief of a trade union for factory workers, identified the factory as a Taiwanese-owned operation called Wing Star that produces sneakers for Asics, a Japanese sportswear label. He said shoes made at the factory were exported to the United States and Europe.

An Asics spokeswoman in Tokyo confirmed the factory was in contract to make Asics running shoes. She said Asics was trying to determine what happened.

"We understand that some people have died, so first we offer our condolences,"

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

said spokeswoman Masayo Hasegawa in Tokyo. She said she did not have information on the last time the building structure had been inspected but added, "We want the highest priority to be placed on saving lives."

The factory complex, which opened about a year ago, consists of several buildings and employs about 7,000 people, said Khem Pannara, the police officer. The structure where the collapse occurred was mainly used as a storage warehouse for shoe-production equipment but had a small work area for about two dozen people, Chea Muny said.

The garment industry is Cambodia's biggest export earner, employing about 500,000 people in more than 500 garment and shoe factories. In 2012, the Southeast Asian country shipped more than \$4 billion worth of products to the United States and Europe.

The U.N.'s International Labor Organization, citing Commerce Ministry figures, says the number of footwear factories nearly doubled in four years to 45 in 2012, accounting for \$268.66 million in exports, with further growth expected. The European Union, which allows Cambodian products duty-free and quota-free entry, represents almost half their market, with Japan the runner-up. The 45 factories employ 69,184 workers.

Although low pay and uncomfortable working conditions would cause some to describe many of the factories as sweatshops, Cambodian workers have several advantages over their Bangladeshi counterparts, including a sometimes feisty labor movement.

Cambodia also hosts a unique program of the International Labor Organization called "Better Factories Cambodia" that assesses and reports on working conditions in all the country's export garment factories, with plans to extend the monitoring to footwear facilities. The impetus for the program was an agreement under which Cambodia pledged better labor conditions in exchange for better trade privileges with the United States.

Critics says that the program is ineffective because it presents findings in an aggregate form rather than publicly naming and shaming factories that fail to meet proper standards. But the program says it is not intended to guarantee full compliance, and instead "brings about improvement on working conditions and compliance over time."

Last month, the program released a report that called for "urgent attention" to worker safety violations in Cambodia's garment and footwear industry.

It found "a worrying increase in fire safety violations," including that only 57 percent of factories kept paths free of obstructions. It reported "unacceptable" heat levels, abuse of overtime hours and a lack of worker access to drinking water.

A separate report on a pilot project on footwear factories found they were not in compliance with a host of labor standards, especially regarding occupational safety

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and health. Chemical safety is a special concern, because the use of toxic solvents is much more widespread than it is for clothing.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/28/2014 - 9:00am):

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